AFFS Newsletter - January 2004

Also available at http://www.affs.org.uk/newsletters/2004-01.html

Welcome to the AFFS newsletter. Topics covered this issue are:-

EDITOR'S NOTE

Our email newsletters have not been on the schedule we had originally hoped for. We now have an editor in place which should help us supply the quarterly newsletters that we had planned.

Original articles and stories submitted by AFFS members and other readers, as well as news about relevant developments, would be a great help in helping us to produce the newsletters.

Please send your contributions to
frontdesk@affs.org.uk
Adam Bower

LONDON LINUXEXPO REPORT

AFFS ran a stand at the LinuxExpo UK 2003 in Olympia 2, London, on 8 and 9 October, as part of the .ORG area. We signed up 11 new supporters, distributed approximately 2000 leaflets to visitors, discussed free software issues with many visitors and participated in informal meetings with other groups. Our stand was shared with GNU merchandise and the Association of Free Software Professionals (AFSP), both of which were visitor attractions.

I would like to offer thanks to: Adam Bower, Kirsten Naylor (both AFFS), Neil Darlow (AFSP) and Nick Hill (GNU merchandise) for being such amazing stand staff; Paul Hedderly (donated a new AFFS sign), Brian Teeman and UKLinux.net (donated leaflet printing and carriage), Alex Hudson and Richard Smedley (leaflet design) for materials that helped to make the stand work; and Steve McIntyre for transporting some of the stand. Also thanks to all the people who stopped by, offered support, paid membership fees and shared useful information over the two days.

See web for links to more info
MJ Ray

SOFTWARE PATENT UPDATE

This last year has been a mixed one for supporters of real limits on software patentability. Sustained pressure from specific companies in various industries has been successfully countered by continued campaigning, the end result of which was the 24th September Proposed Directive on the "Patentability of Computer-implemented Inventions". This proposal, which continues the European tradition of not allowing patents on algorithms, methods or computer programmes, now forms the basis for an extremely positive law which people on both sides of the debate should be able to support.

In the meantime, the practical implications of patenting software are becoming more and more newsworthy, especially in America. Browser plug-ins, font rendering software and user interface elements are all "technologies" that are well-known for being subjects that are heavily patent encumbered, and it is extremely difficult - if not impossible - to write software in these areas that is not covered by some patent or other. Companies are now starting to litigate patent infringement cases more often and for more money, and they are providing excellent examples of the threat to innovation that has been predicted.

For people wanting to get involved with the opposition to software patenting, it was previously quite a difficult task: a Europe-wide directive would be debated and decided in Brussels, far away from the average Brit. However, two things have happened that have given us hope: the Foundation for a Free Information Infrastructure (FFII) setup more formal operations in the UK, which has kept people over here better informed by the troops on the ground over there. Also, the letter writing campaign started by FFII-UK has shown that pressure can be applied, and through our political representatives in this country we can express our opinions at the European level.

The AFFS homepage for the Patent Workgroup is http://www.affs.org.uk/patents/ If you're not aware of the reasons why the AFFS opposes software patents, there are a number of links you can follow to reasonably accessible introductions to the topic. This should be of special concern to those people running businesses producing software (whether free or not) in this country, as these proposals represent greatest financial danger to entrepreneurs in this area.

If you want to be active in your opposition, or wish to continue your activity, there are a number of things you can still do. Firstly, we still ask people to write to their local MP and MEPs, especially is they haven't done so already. Every letter does count, and it's easy to do. It also keeps the issue current; don't forgot this year is election year for the European Parliament. Secondly, join the FFII-UK mailing list from their website, http://www.ffii.org.uk/ This will keep you up to date with what is happening, and is very low traffic usually. Keeping in touch is quite important - we have found previously that sometimes things happen quite fast. You will also find that AFFS' previous Secretary, Dr Brian Gough, is being extremely diligent in keeping the GNU Friends website (http://www.gnu-friends.org/) up-to-date, particularly with regard to patent news. This website is also digested to gnu.misc.discuss on a regular basis.
Alex Hudson

WORKGROUP INTRODUCTION

The AFFS ''campaigns'' have been renamed to ''workgroups'' to emphasise the practical nature of their work. Some groups have moved forwards through their hard work, with education and software patents for example, but other areas need more help and we'd love to get offers of new efforts. Ideally, groups should plan to encourage new projects or coordinate AFFS activities with other groups.
MJ Ray

EDUCATION CONFERENCE

The Free, Libre and Open Source Software In Education (FLOSSIE) Conference will take place on 18 Feb 2004 at the Institute of Education, London. AFFS is co-promoter, along with Schoolforge UK and The Learning Machine. Find out how some schools are already saving a fortune in software licenses and how future trends in development will affect education. Initial responses have been positive, but some delegate places remain. More details and booking form from

http://www.schoolforge.org.uk/fbssie/conference200402.html
MJ Ray

HELP: LPI AND THE UK

There is a group working on creating a UK affiliate of the Linux Professional Institute. LPI's main qualification programme is the LPIC, which tests system administration skills and is taught by independent training providers. A number of current and potential providers and user groups are involved already, but more are welcome. The mailing list is at http://list.lpi.org/mailman/listinfo/lpi-uk
MJ Ray

NEWS: AFSP UPDATE

The AFSP web site (at www.afsp.org.uk) is running old forum and portal software with security fixes but the intention is to bring it up-to-date as soon as possible. The portal will feature better, and more, user features and the forum will get a cleaner look and feel.

Some work has been done in assessing the AFSP's overlap with other organisations, including the AFFS. Our emphasis on production and publishing methodology sets us apart from advocacy organisations. We are therefore able to complement and work with other Free Software organisations without much duplicated effort.

The introduction of software patents, in whatever form, is certain to harm development of Free Software. Some analysis of how the AFSP tenets will assist developers has been done. The requirement appears to be that the design should be formally published to prevent future patent incursion. The AFSP encourages up-front documentation of projects and use of IETF-mandated standards and protocols which should be compatible with this requirement.

The AFSP is looking for individuals with expertise in GNU toolchains, software production and publishing technology to write in-depth articles for the AFSP documentation base. These articles will be made available through the web site download area and referenced in the on-line forum. Anyone interested in contributing to this effort should contact Neil Darlow.
Neil Darlow M.Sc

HISTORY OF FREE SOFTWARE

I am a doctoral student in Economic and Social History, and am writing my dissertation on the history of free software. I am currently compiling a short history of free software use and development in the UK, particularly in higher education, for a separate project. However, I can't seem to find any central repository that already exists, so I'm thinking that I might as well compile something larger and publish it somewhere accessible.

Could folks suggest events or areas of interest that I should include? I am particularly interested in free software use and development in higher education, but would like to include everything that's important. I'm interested in history going back as far as the 1950s. E-mail david.tannenbaum@worc.ox.ac.uk
David Tannenbaum

HELP: BECTA TCO SURVEY

BECTa are looking for schools who are using free software, to inform a research project about total cost of ownership. BECTa advise the government's department for education on computing. If you are interested, please contact Schoolforge-UK's Richard Rothwell on raroth42@yahoo.co.uk
Richard Rothwell

HELP: SICP SURVEY

The Sussex Internet Community Project has asked for opinions and advice about encouraging free software adoption. Please respond to their survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/
s.asp?u=9862357645 and suggest free software (not just open source) that they can use for their tasks.
MJ Ray

GOVERNMENT UPDATE

The government workgroup needs new promoters to monitor our governments, summarise events and start new projects as needed. Please contact frontdesk@affs.org.uk with questions or offers of help.

Departments

The Department of Trade and Industry held a follow-up session about "OSS as a default exploitation route for Government-funded research." They summarised responses and held a discussion. We are yet to get an official summary. If you have one, please contact us.

The Office of the e-Envoy and Cabinet Office GovTalk seem quiet. The Patent Office is consulting on the EU "intellectual property rights" directive at http://www.patent.gov.uk/about/consultations/

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister funded the APLAWS project to create a GPL content management system. I am not sure whether it runs on a free software Java implementation. Details on http://www.aplaws.org.uk/

Parliaments

North Norfolk MP Norman Lamb (Lib Dem) got an answer about the Department for International Development's payments to Microsoft. See web copy for the link.

Patrick Harvie MSP asking questions about "Open Source" got the answers listed by ScotlandIS at http://www.opensourcescotland.org/Members/
andrewv/QuestionsInParliament including the Scottish Executive's 1.4m year spend on Microsoft licences. If you can help in Scotland, please get in touch with us.

Microsoft have committed to producing a Language Interface Pack for Welsh, which translates 80% or so of the English version and makes it hard to switch between languages. AFFS members will continue to recommend truly international free software and ask the Welsh Language Board not to accept second-class offers. For more, see the kyfi eithu press release at http://www.kyfieithu.co.uk/
item.php?lg=en&item_id=79

International

The EU published "IDA Open Source Migration Guidelines" at http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida/jsps/
index.jsp?fuseAction=showDocument&parent=news&documentID=1647 and Free Software Foundation Europe is working on the World Summit on the Information Society. More info at http://www.fsfeurope.org/projects/wsis/wsis.en.html

The long links are also linked from the web edition of this article.
MJ Ray

NEWS: RMS LECTURE

Richard Stallman visited the UK on the 25-26th of October 2003 and gave a lecture on the dangers of software patents in Sheffield and at the univeristy of Westminster in London.

An Ogg Vorbis format version of the speech he gave is available here http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/audio/audio.html#WMUPAT2003
Adam Bower

NEWS: CREATION OF IFSO

Ireland now has its own Free Software organisation, "IFSO" or the "Irish Free Software Organisation" was launched on January 4th 2004 (By no coincidence the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the GNU project). We wish them every success with their new organisation.

http://ifso.info
Adam Bower

TREASURY REPORT

During October, the AFFS received 18 new or renewed subscriptions, mostly due to work of the LinuxExpoUK 2003 team. We have had a similar boost since a feature in Linux Format. We now have 100 paid-up members and 7 due for renewal. I am pleased to note that we have increased our renewal rate, but I believe that AFFS must clearly back projects to keep members. I hope that the workgroup changes and project grants will help to do that.

We received 510 pounds in donations at the show and other small gifts during the month. Thanks to the stand team waiving expenses, the only costs are materials and postage. The AFFS holds over 1300 pounds, 500 of which is earmarked for project grants when the process starts (see requests for comment elsewhere in this newsletter). http://www.affs.org.uk/~mjr/treasury/
MJ Ray

HELP: FOSSLIB HOWTO

A new version of the Free and Open Source Software in Libraries (FOSSLib) HOWTO appeared at http://www.affs.org.uk/~mjr/libraries/ on 19 January. This is based on Bob Kerr's work in Scotland that you may have read about. Help is wanted, particularly with improving the howto, producing more example covers, recording coverage and successes, and using it (of course).
MJ Ray

REQUEST FOR COMMENTS

Comments are invited on these documents. They will be adopted in some form in the near future.

RFC: Free software project grants

We have donations from UKFSN and Network Theory which are earmarked for free software projects. We plan to set up a small review board which will use the following questions to decide which proposals to fund: - is the project original? - does it fulfil a genuine need? - does it represent good value for money? - does it have support from the community?

Full text at http://www.affs.org.uk/~mjr/treasury/rfc-grants.txt

RFC: Sponsorship

The AFFS will no longer accept donations of materials which include advertisements. Instead, we will move to a FSF-style system, where donors are asked to give money and are listed on a donors page. Materials produced with donated funds will point to that page.

Full text at http://www.affs.org.uk/~mjr/treasury/rfc-sponsorship.txt
Adam Bower

NEWS: LU&D EXPO

20-21 Apr 2004 - LinuxUser & Developer Expo 2004

LU&D Expo is back for another year, although it has now relocated to London's Olympia. The main site is http://www.linuxuser.co.uk/expo/ and there is also a
.ORG site at http://www.linuxexpo.org.uk/ AFFS hope to attend as part of the .ORG community.
Adam Bower